I still remember that moment of excitement when I first realized I could read.

I grew up in the west of Ireland and I was actually in church, holding a child’s prayer book. The priest was reading one of the prayers. I suddenly realized I could read the words. I got terribly excited and nudged one of my brothers who didn’t think it was that interesting:
“I understand, I understand!”

I was not yet four years old. I remember my fourth birthday, a real landmark, had not yet come and I was so proud I could read!

After that day in church, I became a voracious reader as many young girls do, always lost in a book all the time.

Because I was a bookworm, I was fascinated by words. I wrote an essay for school when I was age eight in which I used the word “consequently”. The teacher didn’t believe I had written the essay myself! I was so sad and disconcerted, even humiliated that the teacher didn’t believe me.

It taught me later to never underestimate how children can learn very rapidly and love words and learning, sometimes even use words you don’t expect. And now, I have grandchildren who do the same thing today!

I was influenced by my own grandfather who lived in the same small town. He was a lawyer who had retired early. I would visit him almost every afternoon. He would talk to me about law and justice and fairness, taking cases for poor tenants against the landlords. As he was talking with me, all kinds of books would be delivered, from the library or even books imported from England!

Books became very important as far as I was concerned and that sense of law being part of justice was something I learned to appreciate from him. With all these ideas in my head, I would then have to go back to my family and be a child again, told to do my homework and help do chores around the house.

I say I got my early interest in human rights because I was the only girl in my family, wedged between four brothers—two older and two younger!

Both my parents were doctors and they always told me I was equal to my brothers. That equality applied in the family. We each had to do household chores. We all had to wash up and help clean. That’s important when boys and girls grow up together, to have a real sense that both boys and girls should contribute to work in the home.
Too often, the girl child has all the duties, taking care of sick parents or other children. She is often the first to bear those kinds of burdens. We must encourage girls to stay in school. We must stand up with and for her.

When I became interested in human rights, I realized that education is the window to all other human rights. As United Nations High Commissioner for Human Rights, I saw the importance of education when I traveled and I still see it today. You have to understand and know your rights to be able to exercise them. I’ve seen that over and over again.

Many children in conflict or who are displaced don’t have access to schooling. Recently, I was in Eastern Chad at a camp on the border of Darfur, in a camp for displaced families. I saw children being taught in a large group with no pencils, no paper, just a blackboard and a young teacher—but what they did have was an eagerness to learn.

Later, we sat in the camp with the students’ mothers who were also learning how to read. They couldn’t write their names, so they couldn’t directly access the food that was being distributed and often suffered discrimination. Their husbands had been killed due to the conflict, but they were determined to move forward, to be literate and learn to write their own names. They were in a tent, learning by rote, when their children coming out of their classrooms passed by and were teasing their mothers, trying to be quicker to repeat the words. There they were, both generations learning, the children because they had access to education at the right stage of life, the women because they were brave and determined to survive. The mothers shooed away the children and got right back to learning.

In my own country, when I was serving as President of Ireland, I supported women in different parts of divided Belfast, who were bravely making links and calling for their children to be educated together. Their communities were divided by the conflict. It was
hard for them to stand up and say we could do it differently. You don’t come out of conflict unless there is contact between people and leadership shown at local level. Very often it is women who make that connection.

Education has been important in so many situations. I was recently in Liberia with women leaders from Africa and around the world. We talked about how important education is to girls, to protect against so many problems: contracting HIV/AIDS, or older men who may be trying to take advantage of them. It will help her to have a safe birth when she’s a mother. It will help her to know that her children should also be educated.

Education is the beginning of learning how to cope with the world. It opens up choices and opportunities and enables people to become active in economic activity. One of the fastest and most sustainable ways to increase the development of a country is to educate children and particularly our girls. When you educate a girl you educate a family and a community.

I still remember today that sense of adrenaline when I learned to read. It was a real breakthrough. A first step for one girl in Ireland growing up to one day having the opportunity to serve as a leader of my own country and then travel around the world helping others stand up for their human rights.

Every child should have that wonderful moment and opportunity.

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